

SANATORY INQUIRY—TOWNS IN SCOTLAND.

REPORT

ON THE

SANATORY CONDITION OF THE OLD TOWN OF EDINBURGH.

Made to the Poor Law Commissioners by William Chambers, Esq.

C.

Edinburgh, October 3, 1840.

SIR,

AGREEABLE to your request that I should furnish you, for the use of the Poor Law Commissioners, with any information I possessed respecting the cause of insalubrity in Edinburgh, I beg to hand you the following notes which I have drawn up on the subject.

After a pretty extensive observation of the condition of towns both on the continent and in Great Britain, I am of opinion that this city is at present one of the most uncleanly and badly ventilated in this or any adjacent country. Nature has furnished it with a singularly salubrious situation, but circumstances and bad taste have gone far to neutralize the benefits that might be expected to arise from this excellent position. The old town, as you are aware, was originally built in a compact manner within walls; story was piled on story, with the view of saving room, and so closely were jammed the numerous closes or alleys diverging from the main thoroughfare that in many cases a person might step from the window of one house to the window of the house opposite. What was begun from necessity has continued from mere usage. In the newer parts of the town where there is plenty of space, it is still customary to build houses of too great a height, and to cluster in one building as many as six or eight families.

The construction of the town, therefore, is radically unfavourable to health; but as this is now beyond a remedy it is needless to insist upon it, and I proceed to mention those circumstances which come immediately within the means of improvement. Throughout the whole of the older portions of the town, there cannot, generally speaking, be said to be any water-closets in the dwellings, and there are no kind of back courts (as in English towns) in which other conveniences are placed. In a word, the excrementitious matter of some forty or fifty thousand individuals, is thrown daily into the gutters, at certain hours appointed by the police, or poured into carts which are sent about the principal streets. In all the narrow and worst ventilated closes, this practice of throwing out every kind of liquid refuse into the gutters is universally prevalent. Scavengers are appointed by the police, to sweep the streets and lanes daily, and clear away all that appears offensive; but this may be pronounced an impossible task. The evil is too monstrous for cure by any such superficial means. In spite of vigorous regulations to the contrary, the closes which are inhabited by the poorer classes continue in a most filthy condition both night and day; and there is an incessant exhalation of organic and animal substances, which I should consider highly injurious to health. Independantly, however, of the insalubrity from this cause, I am convinced that there is as great a moral evil. The eyes of the people, old and young, become familiarised with the spectacle of filth, and thus habits of uncleanness and debased ideas of propriety and decency are ingrafted.

Within these few years, the practice of introducing water-closets into houses has become pretty general, wherever it is practicable; but in the greater part of the old town nothing of the kind can be accomplished from the want of drains. There are drains in the leading thoroughfares, but few closes possess these con-

veniences, and water is also sparingly introduced into these confined situations. You will therefore understand that *a want of tributary drains and water* is the fundamental cause of the uncleanly condition of the town. Of water of the finest kind there is indeed a plenteous supply, but unfortunately this is a monopoly in the hands of a joint-stock company—not a public affair—and excepting at two or three wells, all the water introduced into the town has to be specially paid for by those who use it.

It is clear that the existing institutions and police regulations in Edinburgh are incompetent to cleanse the town of its impurities. The police bye-laws have done much, but they utterly fail to cure the evil at its root. If I were permitted to suggest a means of remedy, I should mention the following:—

1. A common covered sewer or drain to be made in every close, court, and street, in connexion with a main drain. Each of these drains to have one or more openings with swing-doors to admit the in-pouring of all liquid refuse, but to prevent the escape of effluvia.

2. A much more plenteous distribution of common wells.

3. The crection of several public necessities.

4. All overhanging parts of old buildings to be removed, so as to admit the action of the sun on the ground, and assist ventilation. Any old buildings, valued at a limited price, likewise to be removed, where they evidently intercept a current of fresh air.

5. Powers to be given to the Commissioners of Police to carry these arrangements into effect at the public expense, providing that the outlay was not above say £2000 or £3000, annually.

These arrangements fall short of what would be desirable, but I fear that anything more would not be practicable in the present posture of affairs. I am not disposed to undervalue the advantages of a prevention of the odious foul water irrigation in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh; but I think that much more mischief is done by the foul irrigation *within* than *without* the town, and is more within the power of the inhabitants to remove. With respect to measures of medical police, in the strict sense of the term, I do not require to say anything. All who know the private condition of the town, are well acquainted with the fact of there being an immense deal of destitution and utter neglect. Society, in the densely peopled closes which I have alluded to, has sunk to something indescribably vile and horrifying. Human beings are living in a state worse than brutes. They have gravitated to a point of wretchedness, from which no effort of the pulpit, the press, or the schoolmaster, can raise them. Were we to plant a clergyman in every alley, and scatter the most elevating products of literature gratuitously into every dwelling, the benefits would I verily believe be imperceptible. The class of whom I speak are too deeply sunk in physical distress, and far too obtuse in their moral perceptions, to derive advantage from any such means of amelioration.

At the present moment, the poor of Edinburgh may be said to be deserted by almost everybody but the surgeon or physician. The service performed by the medical profession generally in relieving the acute ailments of the impoverished orders, is much beyond my power of estimating, and reflects upon them the highest honour. With the view of throwing light on the sanatory condition of the town, I lately applied to a medical gentleman, Alexander Miller, Esq., surgeon whom I believed to be well acquainted with the subject, and he kindly afforded me the following answers to certain queries which I proposed. This evidence willingly subjoin for your perusal.

I am, sir,

Yours respectfully,

WILLIAM CHAMBERS.

To Edwin Chadwick, Esq.

Secretary to the Poor Law Commissioners.

Answers by Alexander Miller, Esq. Surgeon, Edinburgh, to Queries proposed by W. Chambers.

How long have you been employed in the medical profession in Edinburgh?—With the exception of the year 1829, which I spent in Paris, I have been engaged in medical practice, in Edinburgh, for the last sixteen years; first, in the capacity of apprentice to the late Mr. George Bell, and secondly, as general practitioner on my own account. Mr. Bell was in the habit of having his apprentices constantly engaged in attending upon the poor, and I am certain that the amount of relief thus afforded would equal what any of the dispensaries now can accomplish.

What opportunities have you had of examining the houses of the poorer classes in the town?—I have had ample opportunities of observing the condition of the poor in Edinburgh, and of witnessing the state of their houses.

I acted as assistant for two years, to a lecturer on midwifery here, and in that capacity superintended a very extensive practice among poor women confined at their own houses.

I have officiated as a medical officer of the Royal Dispensary here for nine years. The patients who apply to such an institution comprise every grade of the poor.

But perhaps the most instructive opportunity yet afforded me of seeing disease and destitution combined, was during the prevalence of the malignant cholera here, when I acted as one of the district surgeons.

What have you observed to be the general condition of the dwellings of the poorer classes?—The dwellings of the poor are generally very filthy in their interior, and in many cases seem never to be subjected to any kind of cleaning whatever. Those of the lowest grade often consist of only one small apartment, always ill ventilated, both from the nature of its construction, and from the densely peopled and confined locality in which it is situated. Many of them besides, are damp and partly underground. But perhaps the most remarkable feature of such dwellings, is the miserable scantiness of furniture, or rather in many cases, the total want of any kind of it. A few of the lowest poor have a bedstead, but by far the larger portion have none, these make up a kind of bed on the floor with straw, on which a whole family are huddled together, some naked and the others in the same clothes they have worn during the day.

In almost no instance is there a supply of water, nor is there any provision for carrying off filth; the effluvia accumulated from these causes are most offensive, especially when disease is prevailing in such dwellings.

It may be mentioned, that some of the houses of the poor are furnished with a small closet, which becomes a nuisance to the rest of the dwelling, in consequence of being used as a depository for all sorts of filth.

Is there much destitution within your knowledge?—I am convinced that a fearful amount of destitution prevails in Edinburgh, very many cases of which private benevolence never reaches, and they are unrelieved by public charity, in so far as the allowances thence derived are totally inadequate.

As respects cases of midwifery in particular, is there much destitution?—During the time I acted as assistant to the lecturer on midwifery, it was my duty to attend upon the poorest classes, during their confinement in such places as Blackfriars Wynd, Grass market, West Port, and Causewayside. I have on numerous occasions been compelled to deliver the patient destitute of a bed, and with nothing to rest upon but a quantity of straw, often upon a damp floor, with an old carpet for a covering, and even where there was an apology for a bedstead, I have often seen a single tattered blanket to constitute the whole stock of bed clothes. In many instances, I have found it impossible to procure clothes sufficient to cover the infant, and although the neighbours in general are very attentive, I have had on more than one occasion to perform the duties which should have devolved upon a female attendant.

Does fever prevail to a serious extent in Edinburgh at particular times? and if so mention in what places?—Isolated cases of continued fever are never totally absent from the dwellings of the poor. When epidemic, I have observed that it prevails with the greatest intensity, and is diffused most rapidly, where large

numbers of human beings are crowded together, inadequately supplied with the necessaries of life and totally regardless of habits of cleanliness, both in their persons and houses. As instances of such localities, I would mention the closes of the High Street and Canongate, the Pleasance, West Port, Grass Market, St. Leonard's Street, the Cross-causeway and some parts of the Causewayside.

It is a matter of the greatest difficulty to arrest the progress of fever in these situations, even by the most active measures, and I have observed that the attendants on fever cases under such circumstances rarely escape being infected, while at the same time it is melancholy to reflect how many of them have been cut off. During the last three years, four young men, two of them apprentices of mine, and the others my pupils at the dispensary, were attacked with fever when attending poor eases in some of the localities I have mentioned above; two out of the four died.

It is well known, on the contrary that when proper precautions are adopted, fever may in a great measure be prevented from spreading among the dwellings of the rich, and that there the medical attendant has little dread of infection.

Do you imagine that the filthy condition of the places you mention influences the state of health?—I am of opinion that filth and bad ventilation in any locality tend to propagate fever when once originated there, but I do not consider them adequate to its production. I agree with Dr. Alison and many other physicians, in thinking that "deficient nourishment, want of employment, and privations of all kinds, and the consequent mental depression" if not of themselves adequate to produce the continued fever of Edinburgh, are much more powerful than "any cause external to the human body itself" in diffusing it.

What do you propose as a remedy?—The only effectual, and I should think at the same time, practicable means, would be to better the state of the poor in respect of nourishment and clothing, to improve the state of their houses, by ventilating the localities in which they are situated, and repairing the houses themselves. Supplying them with abundance of water, and providing them with water-closets, and by the discontinuance of fetid irrigations and any other nuisance generating malaria either in the town or its neighbourhood.

I subjoin a few notes of two eases of destitution, which have come to my knowledge within the last few days,—

1st, W. B., aged 76, residing in the Lawn Market, has lived twenty years in Edinburgh, chiefly in the Greyfriars' parish. For the last twelve years he has supported himself by selling fruit about the streets. He had an attack of palsy in the beginning of this year, when a patient in the Royal Infirmary. Since February, when he left the institution in a very shattered state of health, he has occasionally attempted to resume his former means of support, but the want of money has precluded him from making any purchases but those of the most trifling kind. In order to raise money he some weeks ago pawned a coat (his Sunday one for nine years) for 2s., but he has not been able to redeem it.

This man has an allowance of 5s. in six weeks from the parish, but he has yet only received one payment. The rent of his house is £2 per annum, so that the parish allowance will be absorbed in paying that sum. He has been confined to bed for the last fortnight, with chronic diarrhoea, and is so weak from this cause, and the remains of his paralytic attack, that having occasion to leave his bed some days since, he was unable to return, but fell upon the floor and lay there until his daughter arrived some hours after to his assistance. The account which he gives of his poverty is truly heartrending. During the eight days preceeding last Saturday, he had not the slightest means of supporting life, and had it not been for the kindness of some poor neighbours he must have died of starvation. He informed the narrator of this ease, that on one day the whole sustenance he could procure was a halfpenny worth of bread. The same individual, when calling on Saturday last, about one o'clock p.m., found that this man had not tasted bread that day, and the first supply expected was from the Destitute Sick Society, to whom application had been made. It may be mentioned that the visitor from the society called in the afternoon, and left 1s. 6d., but assured the old man, that no further supply could be granted.

Case 2.—C. and his wife, both aged about 67, residing in Canongate, have lived about 40 years in Edinburgh. The man has had very little employment for the last two years, his branch of trade, having been almost entirely superseded by a *cheap* improvement. He left the infirmary in February last, where he had been confined two months by disease. Since that time to the present (15th October, 1840) his whole earnings do not amount to 20s.

He has received 1s. a week from the parish, since November last, and with this sum, he has to support himself, his wife, and a grown up daughter, who was at one time a servant, but having had an attack of brain fever, has been somewhat silly ever since. This destitute couple have from time to time, as necessity compelled them, pawned different articles of clothing, until they have hardly a sufficiency to cover themselves with, in fact, the old woman has not even this; every available article of furniture has gone to the pawnshop, and many of these are already unredeemable, as no doubt the others will become. The only article in the house in the shape of bed clothes is a solitary blanket.

The only kind of food which their slender means can command is *small* potatoes, and occasionally a pound of meal, and these are at present *eked* out by potatoes, which the daughter gathers in fields that have been cleared. The old woman declared to me that she and her family are often compelled to fast for twenty-four hours together; and sometimes for a whole week, during last winter, she could not get more than a single meal a day, and that of the most meagre kind.

